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Author(s): Andrew M. Carruthers

Source: *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, July 2017, Vol. 32, No. 2
(July 2017), pp. 221-259

Published by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44668416>

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“Their Accent Would Betray Them”: Clandestine Movement and the Sound of “Illegality” in Malaysia’s Borderlands

Andrew M. Carruthers

Ethnically Bugis Indonesians have long emigrated from their homeland in Sulawesi to neighbouring Malaysia, where they gained employment as labourers and rapidly assimilated as Malay-speaking Muslim members of the greater “Malay race”. Shifting socio-political and economic forces have more recently given rise to narratives that characterize Bugis migrants as an intrusive, displacing and “illegal” presence. The rise of this view has culminated in widespread crackdowns on undocumented immigrants in the East Malaysian state of Sabah. Efforts to police such immigrants have, however, proven difficult because of a practical challenge: Bugis Indonesians are virtually indistinguishable from their co-ethnic Bugis Malaysian counterparts. In response, state agents and concerned citizens have relied on a particular sensory modality — *hearing* or *listening* — to detect signs of “illegality”, as they seek to sort non-citizens from citizens, and effectively police omnipresent yet frustratingly illusory presences.

Keywords: language, migration, policing, illegality, Bugis diaspora, Sabah, Malaysia, Indonesia.

Sabah is often referred to as the “Land below the Wind,” a kind of paradise on earth. It is endowed with great beauty, both in terms of land and people. It is rich in natural resources. Tourists flock to see its natural wonders and heritage. They are in awe of its multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-religious settings.... Sabahans should have good reason to feel contented. And yet, underlying all of these, there is, at least from one perspective, a sense of gloom. For decades, Sabahans have been plagued and

haunted by an insidious problem which has turned out to be an all-consuming nightmare. It is endemic. It has grown into a crisis of humongous proportions.... It is, of course, the lingering problem of illegal immigrants in Sabah. — Report of the Commission of Enquiry on Illegal Immigrants in Sabah (Shim et al. 2014)

A spectre is haunting the East Malaysian state of Sabah — the spectre of so-called “illegal immigrants” from Indonesia and the southern Philippines (Kee 2014, p. 154).¹ An alliance of state forces and concerned citizens has coalesced to exorcise this spectre, launching integrated operations to “cleanse Sabah of illegal immigrants” (*Borneo Post*, 19 October 2015) or *membersihkan Sabah daripada pendatang asing tanpa izin* (*Borneo Today*, 21 December 2016). However, and much like the spectre that haunted Marx’s and Engels’s Europe (Marx and Engels [1848] 2002), the one haunting Sabah is omnipresent, constantly felt, yet frustratingly difficult to police or pin down. In Sabah this difficulty stems from a practical challenge: as Malay-speaking Muslim members of the greater “Malay race” (*bangsa Melayu*), Bugis immigrants from Indonesia and Suluk immigrants from the southern Philippines are difficult to distinguish from their co-ethnic Bugis and Suluk Malaysian counterparts in Sabah.

Commentators on the national level have noted that members of Sabah’s ethnic Chinese communities and indigenous Kadazandusun and Murut peoples are quickly becoming “strangers in their own land” (Kee 2014, p. 154). They find themselves increasingly displaced by the state’s Malay community, which has experienced unusual and suspicious growth since the 1970s. Allegations of political actors’ involvement in spurring this unusual demographic shift long centred on Tun Mustapha — the first governor (1963–65) and third chief minister of Sabah (1967–75) — and his United Sabah National Organization (USNO). Observers have claimed that the party illicitly naturalized non-citizen Malays from Indonesia and the Philippines in order to boost the state’s Malay population and sway election results (see Sadiq 2008, p. 160). Later, the ascendant Sabah People’s United Front (BERJAYA) purportedly continued these clandestine practices under the leadership of Harris Salleh (1976–85) (see Frank

2006, p. 74). Accusations intensified after 1990 when BERJAYA under Harris Salleh and USNO under Tun Mustapha joined forces to form the Sabah branch of Malaysia's Malay Muslim ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) (see Mutalib Bin Mohamed Daud 1999). Today, concerned citizens in Sabah claim that these clandestine operations endure. They allege that the UMNO is taking part in "a political conspiracy" to re-engineer Sabah's political demography (Lim 2015). Describing what they have come to refer to as the "IC Project", citizens' groups contend that the ruling party has insinuated itself into infrastructures of clandestine movement by illicitly issuing hundreds of thousands of Malaysian identity cards — known as ICs or MyKads — to Bugis and Suluk immigrants in exchange for their votes in support of the UMNO at the polls (see Carruthers 2016a; Lim 2015; Sadiq 2008). They claim that the UMNO has mobilized Malay immigrants as a countervailing weight to indigenous Christian and ethnic Chinese groups in Sabah, who generally oppose the party's rule. These groups and opposition leaders rhetorically cast these UMNO-voting "illegal immigrants" as "phantom voters" (*pengundi hantu*) — non-citizens whom UMNO operatives enter on to electoral rolls in order to sway elections (*Free Malaysia Today*, 2 December 2011). Members of Sabah's indigenous and ethnic Chinese communities have panned state actions purportedly aimed at addressing concerns about phantom voting, noting that the suspicious growth in the state's Malay population has coincided with the UMNO's consolidation of political power throughout Sabah (*ibid.*; Kee 2014, p. 155).²

It was for these reasons that many indigenous Sabahans were pleasantly surprised when Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak announced the formation of a Royal Commission of Inquiry on Illegal Immigrants in Sabah in 2012. The inquiry lasted almost two years, solicited testimony from more than two hundred academics, politicians, immigrants and even former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad. Much of the testimony confirmed what Sabahans had long suspected, that undocumented immigrants had received identity cards marking them as Malaysians in exchange for pro-UMNO

votes (*Free Malaysia Today*, 18 January 2013). And yet, when the commission's report was released to the public on 3 December 2014 (Shim et al. 2014), many Sabahans were disappointed, reacting with "public disbelief, dismay, and disquiet", reflecting their "dashed hopes ... and even deeper skepticism [of the federal government]" in the words of a leader of the national political opposition to the UMNO (Lim 2015). The report absolved the ruling party of involvement in the illegal issuance of national identity documents to non-citizens. It offered little in the way of advice to the state on disrupting channels of clandestine migration. It offered nothing in the way of practical measures that might improve surveillance of immigrants and make it easier to distinguish them from their co-ethnic and sympathetic hosts. In short, the report's evocative language — quoted in this article's epigraph — may have highlighted concerned citizens' anxieties, but it did little to assuage them.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, testimony from one witness — Yong Teck Lee, a former chief minister of Sabah — suggested a way in which concerned Sabahans might tease apart or unsettle the unsettling samenesses between "illegals" and "locals". When called before the chairman of the Royal Commission of Inquiry, Yong suggested that Sabah rescind the Malaysian identity cards of all residents of the state and issue new, state-specific identity cards to distinguish "illegals" from "genuine Sabahans" (*sabahan tulen*) (*Ant Daily*, 30 April 2014). His remarks echoed ongoing concerns about "fake citizens" with identity cards who remained on the state's electoral rolls (*Sabahkini*, 12 February 2015). The commission then asked Yong how one might visually distinguish "genuine Sabahans" from "illegal immigrants", given that members of both groups look alike and speak the same language. "Obviously being Sabahans, we know and can distinguish genuine locals and these illegal immigrants", the former chief minister told the chairman of the commission. "You can tell by their accents and behavior whether they are locals or not" (*Ant Daily*, 30 April 2014).

This article examines the way in which a particular sensory modality — hearing or listening — serves to distinguish between

two locally salient categories of personhood in the Land Below the Wind: "illegal immigrant" and "genuine Sabahan". Its core argument is that state agents and everyday citizens are detecting "illegal immigrants" by homing in on certain features of speech — intonation and speech sounds — that mark people as outsiders. It frames this argument with ethnographic reference to the Bugis people — an ethnic collectivity whose members include Indonesian immigrants, Malaysian citizens, UMNO politicians and even Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak.³ Drawing on ethnographic accounts and recordings of naturally situated and solicited talk collected in Sabah from 2013 through 2016, the analysis proceeds in four expository moves.⁴ First, it sketches a brief history of Bugis emigration from Sulawesi to Sabah, addressing the effect of Bugis movement between Sulawesi and Sabah in cultivating enduring similarities between Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians. These similarities prove unsettling for Sabahans insofar as they stymie state surveillance efforts. Second, it explores the ways in which everyday acts of hearing have served to unsettle the unsettling samenesses between undocumented Bugis Indonesians and their co-ethnic Malaysian hosts. It suggests that attending aurally to others' habits of speaking has shaped citizens' and state agents' surveillance of "illegal" outsiders, and thus enabled them to distinguish Bugis Indonesians from Bugis Malaysians. Third, it evaluates the interpretation of certain speech sounds as sensory indicators of unlicensed presences in Sabah. It shows how certain sounds and intonation patterns have become enregistered (Agha 2007) or conventionally recognized as indexical of a locally salient social persona, the recently arrived *pendatang asing tanpa izin* or "PATI" or "illegal immigrant" hailing from Sulawesi. It argues that undocumented Bugis immigrants and their co-ethnic Bugis hosts are aware that evincing these enregistered speech sounds might betray the former, revealing their out-of-place-ness and "illegality" to hostile bystanders.

Fourth, the article concludes by theorizing the relationship among imitation, intensity and illegality as it mediates everyday processes of surveillance in a place in which immigrants are difficult to distinguish

from local citizens. It explores immigrants' understanding of the stigma and danger of sounding "too Bugis" (*terlampau kebugisan*), and their efforts to minimize or mask (*tapok*) certain qualities of speech in order to "pass" as locals in the context of Sabah's state of surveillance (Goffman [1963] 1986). In so doing, it suggests the ways in which Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians are jointly evaluating the qualities they share and are coming to understand the ways in which they are "the same, but different" (*sama tapi berbeza*).

Unsettling Similarities and Commensurate Collectivities in a Borderland Region

A creeping political paranoia has suffused everyday life on Sabah's shifting demographic and sociopolitical scene. "Plagued" by an illusory and "all-consuming nightmare" (Shim et al. 2014, p. 3), Sabahans use a locally salient paradigmatic set of terms in Malay and English to characterize the spectre that haunts their state — *pendatang* ("immigrant"), *pendatang asing* ("foreigner"), *pendatang asing tanpa izin* or *PATI* ("illegal"), *Indon* (or "Indonesian"), or *pengundi hantu* ("phantom voter"). Each of these terms conveys the negative valence of "illegality" with varying degrees of explicitness across contexts of use.⁵

In contemporary Sabah and greater Malaysia, these labels are as slippery as they are omnipresent — targeting naturally born Malaysian citizens and undocumented Indonesian immigrants alike. Their willy-nilly referential deployment reflects a local ontology in which citizens and non-citizens, "locals" and "illegals", and friends and foes are assumed to share and evince the same qualities. These shared qualities effectively make them mutually indistinguishable. This ontology is widespread enough that Malaysian-born Bugis-Malay bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, ministers, police officers, electoral officials, religious leaders and even Prime Minister Najib Razak have found themselves targets of anti-immigrant discourses. Take, for example, a critic of Prime Minister Najib's writing in the country's seething blogosphere. Noting the prime minister's recurring tendency

to invoke his Bugis ancestry as evidence of his steadfast bravery, the critic angrily declared, "If Najib wants to be Bugis first and Malaysian second, then he is a *pendatang*!" Consider the case of Datuk OJ, the director of Sabah's Land and Survey Department, head of the Sabah Bugis Community Association (Persatuan Komuniti Bugis Sabah) and an active UMNO member, who once revealed to me that he had received hate mail labelling him a *pendatang*.⁶ Finally, consider a popular claim and widely circulating trope in Sabah, namely that the individuals searching for illegal immigrants-qua-phantom voters are themselves illegal beneficiaries of the "IC Project" (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1 A voting booth in Sabah during a Malaysian general election: "The JPN [National Registration Department of Malaysia, responsible for issuing national identity cards] will help the SPR [Election Commission of Malaysia] search for phantom voters." The ghostly government agent second to the left asks his equally eerie companion, "Are these phantoms or humans?", in standard Malay. The skeletal voters to his right respond saying, "We're all phantoms ... come on", punctuating their utterance with *bah* — a discourse particle from the Sabah dialect of Malay whose pragmatic function lends mild stress to the predication of these interactants' sameness in the utterance that it follows (Mutalib Bin Mohamed Daud 1999).

Increasing concern among Sabah's Kadazandusun, Murut and ethnic Chinese citizens shapes the paranoia that envelops the question of identification — the habit of asking “who's who?” in Sabah. How, hidden as they are under cloaks of “Bugisness” (*kebugisan*) and “Malayness” (*kemelayan*), to distinguish undocumented Bugis immigrants from Sulawesi from their co-ethnic Malaysian counterparts? In the imaginaries of many Sabahans, it is the very fact of their *kebugisan* or “Bugisness” that makes Bugis citizens and non-citizens qualitatively “the same” (*sama*). And yet, while many Sabahans presuppose or take for granted the iconic likenesses between Bugis Malaysians and Bugis Indonesians, it is crucial to remember that these similarities are precipitates of historically cultivated migratory patterns and *in situ* interactional processes. These patterns and processes reflect and have shaped enduring linkages between Sabah and the Bugis homeland of South Sulawesi. In one way or another, Prime Minister Najib, Datuk OJ, Malaysian citizens of Bugis extraction, undocumented Bugis labourers and Bugis phantom voters are all *sama* or “the same” insofar as they trace their roots to Sulawesi.

Famous as shipbuilders, seafarers and itinerant traders, the Bugis have long navigated tempestuous waters and hostile political terrains in “search of good fortune” (in Bugis, *massappa' dallé*), travelling throughout the Malay world and beyond for more than four hundred years (see Acciaioli 2000; Ammarell 2002; Lineton 1975; Pelras 1996). Today, some Bugis have traded in their wooden *phinisi praus* in favour of large iron ferries and opted to migrate from their homeland in South Sulawesi to East Malaysia's Tawau district — a place widely known for more than 130 years as a Bugis enclave and home away from home (Sintang 2007).

Located along the southeast coast of Sabah, Tawau borders Sulawesi to the south and faces the Sabahan interior to the west. With a population reaching almost four hundred thousand, the division has an economy centred on the cultivation of oil palm, cacao and tobacco and on textile manufacturing and timber exports. Since Sabah's incorporation into Malaysia in 1963, Bugis Indonesians

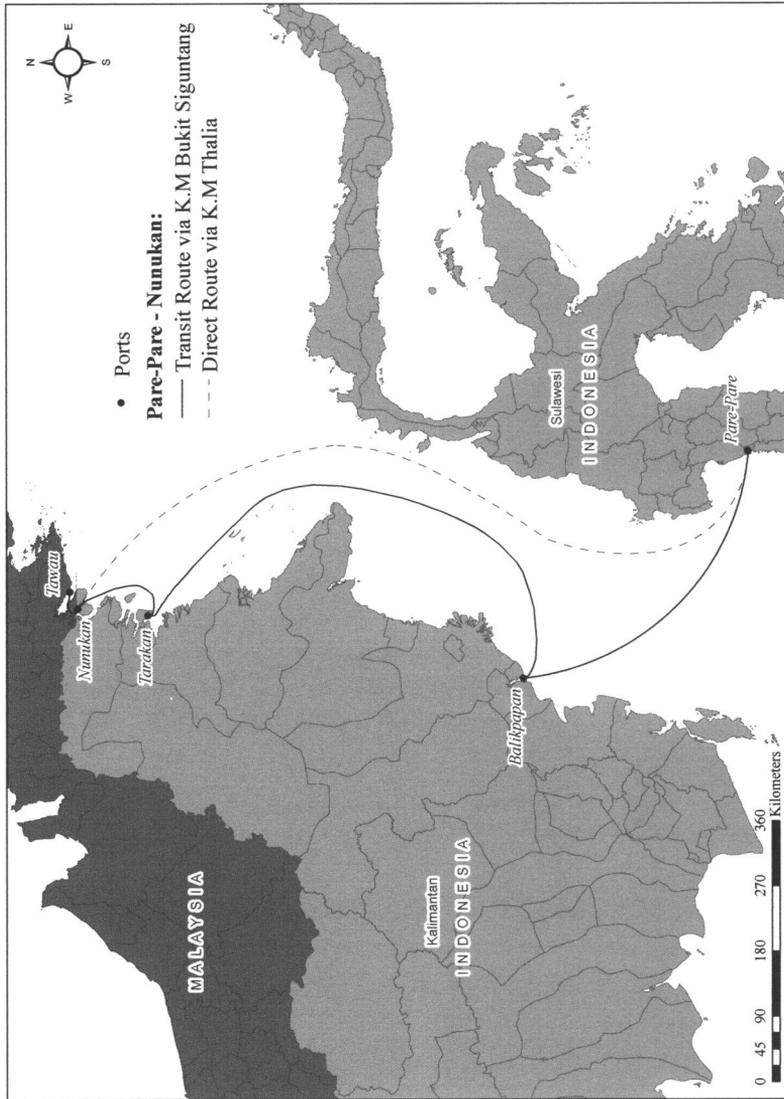


FIGURE 2 Channels of movement between South Sulawesi, Indonesia, and Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia. (Map courtesy of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute GIS Project.)

have actively yet informally migrated to Tawau, where they easily assimilate among their co-ethnic Malaysian counterparts and are tacitly understood to occupy “niche” positions as labourers on Sabah’s booming oil palm plantations. Many remain in Tawau, while others disperse throughout the rest of Sabah. Some stay a few years before returning to their homeland, while others settle permanently despite their undocumented status.

While indigenous Sabahans popularly think of the Bugis of Sabah as relative newcomers to the Land Below the Wind, they have been settling in Tawau for well over a century. Sintang (2007, pp. 6–10), a Malaysian scholar of Bugis extraction, has traced the earliest Bugis settlements in Tawau to the early 1880s, noting a dearth not only of official records of initial Bugis settlement there but also of scholarship on Bugis communities in Sabah more generally. She notes that the earliest Bugis migrants to Tawau hailed from Wajo, a Bugis kingdom in then Dutch-controlled Celebes whose boundaries now roughly correspond with Kabupaten Wajo or Wajo Regency in contemporary South Sulawesi. Puado, a Bugis man whom the British North Borneo Chartered Company had offered a plot of land, led these first immigrants. They numbered but twenty-five, and Tidong, Suluk, and Bajar people also accompanied them on their migration. The number of Bugis immigrants to Tawau area gradually increased. Their leaders included not only Puado but also such figures as Daeng Pasawa, Haji Chanok, Daeng Mapatta and others, who all became well known as merchants, landowners and grocers. Puado died in 1902, but by 1915 the settlements in Tawau — mostly in the area surrounding its recently established port — had coalesced and were popularly referred to as “Bugis Town” (ibid., pp. 30–31). A year later, the *British North Borneo Herald* highlighted the industriousness of these newcomers from Celebes. “[T]he most energetic and successful cultivators are the *orang Bugis* [Bugis people], who own nearly all of the large and valuable land under coconuts ... East and West of Tawau town” (ibid., p. 31). In 1921 the number of Bugis settlers had expanded to around 1,170, and by 1931 that number rose to 1,415 (ibid., p. 31). Bugis labourers seeking good fortune migrated

in waves to the Tawau district and greater British North Borneo. Ongoing investment in the rubber, textile and palm oil sectors on the part of Kuhara and Kubota, two Japanese conglomerates, attracted them to the area and to the incomes that they could earn there. Following the tumult of the Second World War and the incorporation of British North Borneo into contemporary Malaysia as Sabah in 1963, Tawau had developed into a Bugis stronghold. A steady flow of Bugis Indonesians migrated there to work on burgeoning cacao and oil palm plantations (*ibid.*, pp. 52–59).

Today, Bugis migrants continue to move along these well-trodden channels of migration. Hundreds of migrants en route from South Sulawesi to Sabah board ferries at two points of embarkation — the provincial capital of Makassar and the port city of Pare-Pare — with luggage carried underarm and slung over their shoulders. They are bound for the coastal city of Nunukan on the Indonesia–Malaysia border. Those migrants who choose to board the Bukit Siguntang make way-stops in Balikpapan and Tarakan before arriving in Nunukan after a three-day trip. Others, who board the Thalia, enjoy a direct and relatively short one-day trip to the border city. On reaching Nunukan, they may avail themselves of either of two options, one officially sanctioned and the other clandestine. The first option entails taking a short speedboat ride to Tawau and disembarking at the dock adjacent to the town’s official immigration office for processing. The second entails taking a similar speedboat ride, but in this case to Sebatik Island, on which — drawing on kinship networks or the services of informal migration brokers — migrants navigate *jalan tikus* or “mouse paths” and slip through Tawau’s porous borders. Those who choose the latter option and safely reach dry ground in Malaysia note that they have effectively been “smuggled” or *risomokolo*.⁷

On setting foot in Tawau town, Bugis Indonesian migrants encounter sights, smells, tastes and sounds suggestive of the ways in which their new temporary or adopted home is not so different from their homeland. Telecommunications billboards featuring the Bugis language promise migrants “the lowest rates to call home!” (*Ongkoso’ massempo’ narekko maeloki makutanang lao ri*

kampo'taq!).⁸ Small clothing shops advertise traditional Bugis garb for weddings and other special occasions. Vehicles stuck in traffic in and around the immigration office feature bumper stickers or window decals written in the *aksara lontara'* or traditional Bugis script. Hungry immigrants in need of a meal might head to a food court adjacent to the immigration office, where they find stalls serving *coto Makassar* — a spicy beef stew traditionally served in Makassar and greater South Sulawesi. Finally, weary migrants in need of transport might be pleasantly surprised by the sounds of taxi and bus drivers speaking the Bugis language (Figure 3).⁹

Fibre-optic lines, kinship networks and the official and clandestine routes of ferries, speedboats and automobiles constitute a diasporic



FIGURE 3 Signs of similarity in Tawau, Malaysia. Clockwise from top left: An advertisement for traditional Bugis wedding garb; a telecommunications advertisement in Malay and the Bugis ethnic language promising the “lowest rates to call home”; a car decal featuring the Bugis script that identifies the driver as being of Bugis Boné descent (Transliteration: *Wija Ogi Boné*). (Photographs taken by the author.)

infrastructure linking the Bugis homeland with Tawau (Carruthers 2016b, p. 18). As an ensemble of social and material affordances, this infrastructure has enabled, constrained and motivated the movement of bodies and the attendant transmission of values from South Sulawesi to the Bugis enclave in Tawau.¹⁰ It has shaped the ways in which Malaysians of Bugis extraction align themselves towards their ancestral homeland, and the ways in which Bugis Indonesians think about Tawau as a domain of enactable possibilities. It has cultivated a transnational sense of Bugis “fellowship” or “sameness” — rough glosses for the Bugis concept of *sempugi* — and shaped the ways in which Bugis Malaysians and Bugis Indonesians orient themselves towards their shared Bugisness.

Some Bugis Malaysians have instrumentalized the qualitative sameness that obtains between themselves and their “illegal” counterparts. They have shrewdly mobilized this sameness for political purposes. For decades, many Sabahans have trained a wary eye on Malay groups like the Bugis or Suluk, alleging that they have been intimately involved in the “IC Project” and distributed national identity documents to undocumented immigrants in exchange for pro-UMNO votes. These allegations came to a head in 1999, when state election results in one of Sabah’s constituencies were declared null and void because of the suspected influence of phantom voters. Court proceedings include an assertion that, in the years prior to the election, high-ranking Bugis members of the UMNO in Sabah had put a clandestine operation in place. Targeting “Malays of Bugis origin” from Indonesia, the operation provided falsified national identity documents to immigrants, who then flooded voting booths to vote in support of the ruling party (*Harris Mohd Salleh v. The Returning Officer, Ismail Majin*, June 2001).

The proceedings also note the arrests between 1996 and 1998 of several individuals under the Internal Security Act for the distribution of fake identity cards to immigrants (*ibid.*). The court documents suggest that the Persatuan Kebajikan Bugis Sabah, to which some of those arrested belonged, may have played a tacit roll in the distribution of the cards. Today, the association, since renamed the

Persatuan Komuniti Bugis Sabah, strenuously denies such allegations of involvement. Many members claim, not without good reason, that accusations against the association reflect widespread anti-Bugis sentiment in contemporary Sabah.¹¹

For citizens and opposition politicians concerned with issues of “illegal immigrants” in Sabah, the similarities between Bugis Malaysians and Indonesian newcomers are unsettling not least insofar they unsettle efforts to police undocumented immigrants. They believe that a Bugis diasporic infrastructure linking Sabah with Sulawesi has had pernicious sociopolitical and demographic impacts. The political activist and best-selling author Mutalib bin Mohamed Daud, or Mutalib MD, has suggested that the ebb and flow of migrants back and forth between Sulawesi and Sabah, coupled with their everyday interaction with Bugis Malaysians, calls the latter’s ethno-national loyalties into question. He notes that, among the Malaysia-born Bugis of Tawau, a diasporic infrastructure “continues to animate a greater ethnic consciousness” (Mutalib 1999, p. 45) and prevents citizens who “are still sympathetic toward their ancestral land” from “los[ing] contact with their homeland” (ibid.). It allows migrants to “freely leave and enter [Malaysia] through Tawau without any difficulties”, he claims (ibid.).¹² More unsettling still, the existence of this infrastructure has intensified interactions between Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians to such a degree that Sabahans find members of the two groups difficult to tell apart. Mutalib notes that “outside” Bugis culture “has undergone a process of assimilation and diffusion to the point” that Malaysian citizens “can no longer differentiate those ... who are more Bugis” (ibid., p. 455).¹³ For Mutalib, the degree of one’s relative “Bugisness” is an indication of one’s relative foreignness.

Mutalib is not alone in identifying the challenge of distinguishing Sabahan “locals” from “illegals”. As another best-selling Malaysian author explains, “Muslim foreigners, most of them Sulu[k] from the Philippines and Bugis from Indonesia ... can easily assimilate into the Sabah environment and look like they originated from there” (Kee 2014, p. 154).¹⁴ A 2006 letter to *Malaysiakini* — a pro-opposition

national news portal — pointed to the ease with which “Muslim foreigners” like Indonesian Bugis migrants insinuated themselves into the fabric of everyday Malaysian life. The widespread distribution of Malaysian identity cards to non-citizens eased their seamless assimilation, the writer alleged.

It is hard to distinguish the locals from these Muslim foreigners, and thus, they can easily assimilate into the state’s population by purchasing forged Malaysian passports and identity cards. Since these Muslim foreigners are not easy to trace, one cannot be sure if their numbers are effectively strong enough to take control of the state through mass membership [in] the ruling UMNO. But it is a fact that their numbers have swelled over the last twenty-five years. (*Malaysiakini*, 28 July 2006)

In well-known cases of clandestine cross-border migration in other parts of the world, there is an assumption that undocumented migrants exhibit obvious signs of their “illegal” or “outsider” status that enable their construction as “permanent others” (see Dick 2011, pp. 229–32; Silverstein 2005). They are assumed to “stand out” from local people in phenotypic, linguistic, cultural and religiously evident ways. So too, the literature on border-crossing typically characterizes borderland migration as the navigation of radical difference or incommensurable worlds, as individuals move from setting to setting, place to place, or state to state (see Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p. 18). Study of clandestine Bugis movement through the Indonesia–Malaysia borderlands may thus both present a valuable contrast to these cases and make a significant contribution to the broader border-crossing literature.

In contemporary Malaysia, Malay-speaking Muslims are readily seen as members of *bangsa Melayu* or the “Malay race”, a racial category that envelops ethnic groups ranging from Javanese, Bugis, Minangkabau, to many others.¹⁵ In this respect, Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians represent radically commensurate collectivities. They share the same characteristics and exhibit those qualitative characteristics in more or less similar intensities (Carruthers 2016b, p. 9).¹⁶ Amidst ongoing crackdowns against illegal immigrants,

however, state agents and concerned Sabahans are increasingly attuned towards the “lesses” that divide Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians as opposed to the “mores” that unite them. Through everyday acts of commensuration — a process whereby different entities with shared qualities are characterized and compared along gradations of more-or-less-ness (ibid., p. 31) — state agents and citizens are jointly appraising the similarities between Bugis citizens and non-citizens, recognizing them and their everyday presentations of self as “the same, but different” (*sama tapi berbeza*). They are coming to understand the qualitative sameness between Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians as something that conceals lurking and spectral differences — differences that may be sieved for and seized upon in order to differentiate members of the two groups.

As I demonstrate in the following section, state agents and ordinary citizens are sieving for wrinkles of difference between local people and foreigners, citizens and “illegals”, Malaysians and Indonesians, and friends and foes by relying on a particular sensory modality — hearing or listening. By evaluating suspicious speech sounds and ways of talking against situationally salient norms and forms, they are making legible the spectral and unlicensed presences that dwell among them and haunt the Land Below the Wind.

Hearing Like a State

After the annulment of the 1999 state election results in one of Sabah’s constituencies due to the suspected influence of phantom voters, national and local media devoted coverage not only to that case but also to several other similar cases. In 2001, the Malaysian national news agency BERNAMA reported on the problem of phantom voters in Sabah, noting that “[l]ocal people who claimed to have encounters with illegal voters said it was difficult to recognize them[,] especially when they were in an area with a mixed composition of races. Once the illegal voters mingled among the crowd, they could pass off [*sic*] as locals” (BERNAMA, 18 June 2001). “However”, the report continued, their “behavior and awkward local accent

would betray them in the remote polling districts where the voters were mainly from the same ethnic group. Rural people also knew one another, making the phantom voters more noticeable" (ibid.). The chairman of a local Security and Development Committee overseeing a polling station in northern Sabah confirmed this view in commenting on five men who attempted to vote there. "From their accent, we knew that they were outsiders", he observed (ibid.).

Also in 2001, an immigration officer led an undercover raid on undocumented foreign workers in a Peninsular Malaysian supermarket. The plain-clothes personnel posed as customers, and walked through the market, listening closely to the sounds of vendors' speech as they hawked their items. The officer explained to the national media that, while "identifying foreigners based on looks alone was tricky as many look like locals", he and his fellow officers "paid close attention to the workers as they spoke [and] were not duped because of their strong accent" (*Star Online*, 14 May 2012). Those vendors whose Malay speech deviated from certain norms were arrested and detained. The "illegals" couldn't "talk their way out of [the] raid", a newspaper declared (ibid.).

Authorities have staged similar raids in Tawau town. As the town is widely known as a Bugis enclave, UMNO stronghold and final stop for undocumented migrants from Indonesia, the town's fish and vegetable markets adjacent to its harbour are targets of random yet regular sweeps on the part of immigration officials, security forces and police. A Malaysian inspector has described the town's fish market and harbour as a "landing jetty for illegals" (*Utusan Online*, 30 November 2008). In search of undocumented migrants and workers with fraudulent or borrowed identity cards and sales licences, uniformed and plain-clothes agents sweep through the market. They search for, attend to and differentiate wrinkles in vendors' speech forms and other behavioural signs as they relate to "local" norms and forms. Insofar as agents see these wrinkles as revealing illicit presences in their midst, they ask those who evince them to produce identification cards or licences. They will detain those who fail to do so or who present fraudulent licences, while

others — according to my Bugis informants in Tawau — will run to the docks behind the fish market, jump into the sea and go into hiding, only to return to their posts once the coast is clear.¹⁷

Finally, consider the statement of a Malaysian Immigration Department officer found in a recent report on fake national identity cards held by undocumented immigrants. The officer noted that the MyKad identity cards are produced by syndicates in Sabah that “have been around for ages” and that “are very advanced in their methods.... The syndicates get the tools they need to make the fake MyKads easily in the market and online. As for the data, they can get these from leaked data from credit card companies and stolen or lost MyKads” (*Free Malaysia Today*, 24 January 2016). Making MyKad-carrying non-citizens legible, the officer explained, does not



FIGURE 4 A warning to workers in Tawau’s fishmarket from the Tawau Municipal Council: “It is directed that all licence holders and assistants wear their seller identification cards and assistant cards while conducting business.” (Photograph taken by the author.)

depend exclusively on the diligent, everyday authentication of identity documents. The authentication of certain individuals' apparently valid identity cards only occurs after immigration officers become sensorially attuned to particular behavioural signs that they deem suspicious. "This is where Immigration officers come into play, we observe their movements or accents and then check their MyKads against [National Registration Department] records" (ibid.). Officers' awareness of distinctive — that is, suspicious — features of speech and movement requires a certain narrowing of sensory perception.

In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott notes,

Certain forms of knowledge and control require a narrowing of vision. The great advantage of such tunnel vision is that it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality. This very simplification, in turn, makes the phenomenon at the center of the field of vision more legible and hence more susceptible to careful measurement and calculation. (Scott 1998, p. 11)

In contemporary Malaysia, seeing like a state — or, more precisely, like a state agent — requires, as Scott notes, a certain narrowing of vision. An optic metaphor, however, does not fully capture the sensory, aural experience of Malaysian officers' work to detect the illegal presences that dwell among them. The brief examples offered above suggest that state agents have developed a kind of tunnel hearing as they sonically sort non-citizens from citizens. Illusory, spectral and illegal presences are orally revealed and made aurally legible across different interactional settings throughout Malaysia.

Sounding "Illegal" (Or, Sounding "Too Bugis")

Indonesianist Joseph Errington has noted that out-of-the-way places in Indonesia pose "a kind of linguistic puzzle" (Errington 2014, p. 199). In Kupang, West Timor, although the Indonesian national language has "uncontested primacy within a far-reaching network of state institutions, a rapidly developing political economy, [and] the mass media ... fluent, standard Indonesian is not much heard in Kupang" (ibid.). Instead, Errington notes, people speak a local

variety of Malay known as “bahasa Kupang” or “Kupang language”. Like many settings stretching across the Indonesian archipelago, people in Kupang are not regularly speaking standard Indonesian, but are instead using a non-standard Malay variety in their everyday communicative interactions.

We may generalize Errington’s insights and bring them to bear on cities in South Sulawesi, the ancestral home of the Bugis. Depending on to whom they are talking and where they find themselves, bilingual Bugis will either speak the Bugis language or a variety of Malay known as *logat Makassar* (“Makassar accent”) or Makassar Malay. This regional variety of the language results from the assimilation or mixing of Bugis-Makassar grammar and phonology with Indonesian words or lexical material. Bugis do not speak it only in the homeland, however. Bugis wanderers will carry it with them from migration way-stop to way-stop, and eventually to Tawau, Malaysia.

Sometimes this linguistic baggage weighs heavily on whether or not undocumented immigrants can effectively pass as local people. Take, for example, a transcript presented by journalist and activist Mutalib MD, the aforementioned author of the best-selling book, *IC Palsu: Merampas hak anak Sabah* (Fake Identity Cards: Depriving the Rights of Sabah’s Children). The transcript centres on exchanges on a bus in eastern Sabah filled with Bugis passengers that the police pulled over. Searching for undocumented immigrants, the police allegedly boarded the bus and scanned its passengers for suspicious individuals. One policeman homed in on a particular individual and asked him for his credentials. The transcript of their interaction is reproduced here.

Konstabel (Policeman): Mana pas kamu? [Where is your pass?]

Lelaki Bugis (Bugis man): Ada *Puang*. [I have it, Sir.]

K: Ini KTP [This is an Indonesian identity card] ...

L: Eh ... salah *palek*. Ini *Puang*. [Eh ... I’m wrong if that’s the case. This one, Sir.]

K: Ini salinan. Mana original? [This is a copy. Where’s the original?]

L: Ada *Puang* tapi maaf, kena tinggal di rumah *Puang*. [I have it, Sir, forgive me, I left it at home, Sir.]

K: Ada lain-lain dokumen? [Do you have any other documents?]

L: Ini *Puang* ... [This one, Sir ...]

K: Ini slip mengundi. Saya mahu tengok pas, mana pas? [This is a voting slip. I want to see your pass. Where is your pass?]

L: Ada *paspok Puang*, *barusan palek* aku ambil tadi. [I have my passport, Sir, just now I took it earlier.]

K: Turun. [Get off the bus.]

L: Tapi *Puang* ... [But, Sir ...]

K: Turun. [Get off the bus.]

L: Ini ada sijil UMNO *Puang*. [I have my UMNO certificate, Sir.]

K: Oh! Kau ingat kau boleh jual saya! Turun. [Oh! You think you can fool me? Get off the bus.]

L: Tolong *Puang*. [Please, Sir.]

K: Turun. [Get off the bus.]

(Mutalib 1999, pp. 154–55; English glosses of original text underlined and bracketed by the author.)

Throughout his self-published book, Mutalib offers no information regarding the broader context and provenance of this transcript or others, and we must thus view them with some suspicion. Yet this “transcript” is still relevant to our concerns here insofar as it invokes and articulates a widely circulating stereotype of the “Bugis man”, newly arrived, uneducated *pendatang* from South Sulawesi. In this passage, Mutalib draws his readers’ attention to particular lexical items — the Bugis honorific *Puang* or “Sir”, for example — by italicizing them and identifying them as Bugis and decidedly non-local. His expository strategy is to highlight a recurring discrepancy, one that has become a trope in contemporary Sabah. An individual carries a card identifying himself as a member of the ruling party, and yet certain features of his speech sound out of place. In the context of the bus, the policeman saw these out-of-place words as indicators of the passenger’s illegal status, detained him and brought him in for questioning. His accent — or word choice — betrayed him.

It is not always an individual’s choice of words, however, that may be read as indicating illegal status. In October 2013, I sat in a beer garden in Tawau. A man approached me, sat down at my table, and ordered a drink. He asked me what I was doing in Tawau. Speaking in Malay, I told him about my research and explained

that I was living among the district's Bugis community. He then began speaking about issues of *pendatang* from Indonesia. When the conversation turned to the behavioural and linguistic differences between undocumented Bugis Indonesians and their co-ethnic Malaysian counterparts, he offered the following insight.

First off, their accent ... Their pronunciation is often the same ... but their slang ... Like, their accent has ... What is it? That “melody” (*Pertama dia punya loghat ... sebutan kadang-kadang sama ... cuma dia punya sleng ... macam, dia punya, apa itu, lagu-lagu itu*).¹⁸

“A melody?”, I asked. He replied in the affirmative, saying, “It’s melodic. The sound of it isn’t the same.”¹⁹ He traced the jagged edges of an invisible mountain range in the air with his hand. By *lagu* or “melody”, he was referring to the sing-songy sound-shape of prototypically Bugis intonation contours. In effect, he was observing that Bugis immigrants from Indonesia superimpose the pitch patterns of the language of their ethnic group on to Malay lexical material.

The sing-songy quality of Bugis immigrants’ speech is often the target of jokes from their co-ethnic Malaysian counterparts. In contrast to Bugis hailing from Indonesia, few Bugis born and raised in Malaysia are proficient in the Bugis language. Instead, and depending on their level of education, they speak English or a form of Malay variously referred to by speakers and researchers as the “language of Sabah” (*bahasa Sabah*), the “speech of Sabah” (*cakap Sabah*), “Sabah Malay” (*Melayu Sabah*), or the “Sabah Malay Dialect” (*dialek Melayu Sabah*) (Wong 2000 and forthcoming; see also Collins 1989, p. 240).²⁰ In contrast to the sing-songy talk of undocumented Bugis immigrants, Malaysian Bugis will characterize the sound-shape of their own “Sabah speech” as more *rata* or “flat”. My Malaysian informants — when told that I was researching Bugis immigrants from Indonesia — would sometimes make fun of such people, saying “They speak like this!” (*Mereka cakap begini!*) with overly dramatic rises and falls in pitch.

During the month of Ramadan in July 2014, a Malaysian friend took me to the home of some acquaintances who held identity cards indicating that they were Malaysian citizens by birth, but who in reality hailed from Boné regency in South Sulawesi. We were going there, he told me, partly because he had some catching up to do with his friends. But he also figured that I would take note of their distinctly Bugis habits of speech, which marked them as outsiders despite their having resided in Malaysia for decades.

When we arrived, a married couple in their late fifties invited us in and gave us tea and cookies. The wife began telling us about how annoyed she was with her husband for his having insisted on taking so much gold back to their family in Sulawesi during one of their recent trips "home". It was a burden to carry, and it was dangerous, she said, alluding to the pickpockets that terrorized travellers on the ferries that went back and forth from the Indonesia–Malaysia border to South Sulawesi. When asked how much gold he had carried back with him, she said in Makassar Malay, "Fiiiiive [pieces] he brought back to Indonesia, five pieces of gold" (*Liiiiima nabawa pigi di Indonesia, lima emas*). As she said this, my friend shot me a look as he stifled a grin, as if to say, "Did you hear that?"²¹ Having recorded the conversation in its entirety, I offer here an intonation contour of the woman's utterance to represent the dramatic rises and falls of her pitch — rises and falls that evoke the invisible mountain range traced in the air by the informant whom I cited above (Figure 5). Note in particular the rise and fall of the final "mountain", corresponding with the final noun-phrase in her utterance — *lima emas* ("five [pieces of] gold").

Consider the above interaction with respect to one occurring in December of the preceding year, when three other Malaysian friends took me to the home of another married couple on the palm oil plantation on which they worked. The husband and wife also had identity cards indicating that they were native-born Malaysian citizens, but they too actually hailed from Boné. After sitting down on their porch, the wife apologized in advance for her low proficiency in Malay, explaining that she felt more at home speaking her Bugis

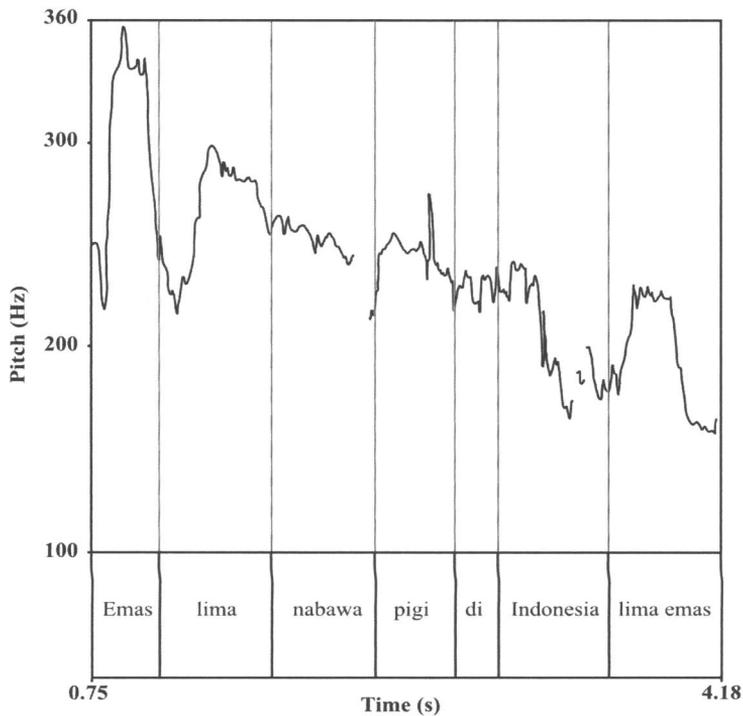


FIGURE 5 Pitch contour: “He brought five pieces of gold to Indonesia, five pieces of gold.”

mother tongue. “I don’t know half of Malay!” (*Nda’ tahu separuh itu Melayu!*), she exclaimed.²² Again, note in the figure the mountain-like sound-shape of her speech, and the dramatic phrase-final fall on *Melayu* or “Malay” (Figure 6).

Before we arrived at this second couple’s home, one of the friends whom I accompanied there had jokingly told me that these and other Bugis immigrants went to “Balikpapang”, whereas other Malays went to “Balikpapan”. She was referring to a port city in Indonesian Kalimantan and a common way-stop for Bugis migrants on their way to Malaysia. In Malay, she said, “*Orang Melayu pigi Balikpapan, Orang Bugis pigi Balikpapan*”.²³ “Getting” or understanding the joke hinged upon an awareness of the way that

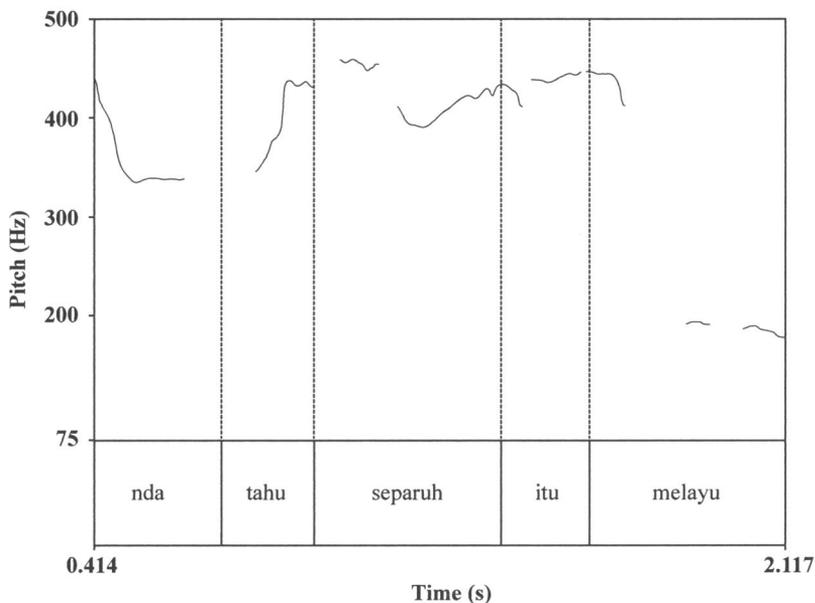


FIGURE 6 Pitch contour: “I don’t know half of Malay!”

sounds are structurally ordered in the Bugis language.²⁴ In Bugis, only the glottal stop [ʔ] and velar nasal [ŋ] — think of the “ng” sound in the English word “sing” — appear as consonants at the ends of words. Much like the sing-songy nature of intonation contours, this structural ordering of sounds is “brought over” from Bugis to Malay, shaping and constraining the ways in which Bugis speak the Malay language: “Balikpapan” becomes “Balikpapang”, “ikan” (“fish”) becomes “ikang”, “makan” (“to eat”) becomes “makang”, and so on and so forth.

Much like sing-songy intonation contours, the “-ng” in word-final position is also the target of jokes among Bugis immigrants’ co-ethnic Malaysian counterparts. “*Jom pigi makang ikang!*” [Let’s go eat some fish!], my Bugis Malaysian friends would sometimes say while laughing, knowing that the “proper” Malay would be “*Jom pigi makan ikan*”. The linguistic baggage that immigrants bring with them is not

always a source of amusement, however. While many would joke about immigrants' habits of speech, one Malaysian informant told me he felt "annoyed" (*geram*) on hearing typical Bugis intonation contours or the tell-tale "-ng" in the speech of people who should not be speaking "like illegals" (*macam PATI*).²⁵ A Malaysian citizen of Bugis extraction, this individual felt a sense of shared humanity and Bugis fellowship (*sempugi*) with immigrants from South Sulawesi who arrived in Sabah in search of better lives. As such, he was not bothered by the alleged circulation of national identity cards among such immigrants. However, and like the policeman who detained the UMNO member whose accent betrayed him, my informant understood how card-carrying "Malaysian citizens" must speak Malay in ways that conform to locally salient standards. If these newly baptized card-carrying "citizens" were to sound "too Bugis" (*terlampau kebugisan*) in front of the wrong individuals, such as police or immigration officials, their accents would render the value of their identity cards null and void. Sing-songy speech or too many velar nasals in word-final position would mark them as "illegals" and draw attention to their fraudulently obtained identity cards. In short, sounding "too Bugis" could reveal them as beneficiaries of the IC project, and potentially betray not only them but also the Malaysians who provided them with the cards in the first place. My informant felt "annoyed" at a perceived complacency with which many migrants hold on to their distinctive features of speech, in spite of the risks of doing so.

Another informant agreed, saying that Bugis immigrants needed to mask or "hide their Bugisness" (*tapok kebugisannya*) in particular settings. She told me,

It's best if they [Bugis immigrants from Indonesia] correct their pronunciation as best they can, because from their pronunciation one can tell if they've lived a long time in Sabah or just a few years, even though they're identity card holders" (*Sebaiknya mereka harus memperbaiki sebutan bahasa sebaik mungkin kerana dari sebutan situ diketahui mereka sudah lama tinggal di Sabah atau baru berberapa tahun saja padahal mereka adalah pemegang IC*).²⁶

Another time, I asked her to explain this point in greater depth, and in response she made the following crucial observation.

[The way they talk] points to the fact that the IC isn't appropriate for them to have, because their language isn't the language of a Sabahan or Malaysian ... It's like [the language] of an illegal from Sulawesi" (*Menunjukkan bahawa IC itu tidak sesuai untuk mereka miliki, sebab bahasanya seperti bukan Sabahan atau Malaysian ... Seperti PATI yang berasal dari Sulawesi*).²⁷

For this Bugis Malaysian, the issue at hand is precisely not that these individuals are "illegals from Sulawesi" who have illicitly obtained national identity cards. Rather, the problem is that they sound like "illegals from Sulawesi", with habits of speech that could potentially reveal them as unlawful recipients of Malaysian identity cards.

Not all immigrants allow their accent to betray them. Many are aware of the sonic entailments of phonic missteps. Consider the following exchange in a recorded conversation in Malay among Bugis palm oil plantation workers in their quarters. Prompted to speak about the signs that might reveal illicit presences to state agents, they highlighted the "-ng" that so often emerges at the ends of words.

H: Ada, ada, ada juga. [There are, there are, there certainly are (signs that give us away).]

RB: "Jangang". [An example derived from the Malay word "Jangan", or "Do not".]

RA: Semua "-NG", semua "-NG". [It's all "-NG", it's all "-NG".]

RB: "-NG".

RA: Macam "makang", "-NG" 'tu selalu ada. [Like "makang" (from the Malay verb "makan" — "to eat"), that "-NG" is always there.]²⁸

This exchange demonstrates immigrants' awareness of the perils of a certain sound, and their consciousness of the interpretations of people who hear that sound. If overheard by police officers making checks on the highway, by immigration officials in supermarkets, or by concerned citizens at polling stations, it is a sound that could betray them.

Conclusion: Imitation, Intensity, Illegality

Regarding the oft-repeated phrase, “No human being is illegal”, anthropologist Daniel Goldstein writes that “from a humanist or activist perspective the statement is clearly true. Our basic shared humanity should trump any politics, and laws that divide us on the basis of citizenship or race or identity are unjust” (Goldstein 2014). Indeed, this is how many Bugis Malaysians feel about their Indonesian counterparts who settle in Sabah through clandestine channels. They note that the Bugis sense of *sempugi* (roughly, “Bugis togetherness”) or the Malay concept of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy or sovereignty in Malaysia) trump the labile legal categories that individuals may inhabit across shifting socio-political terrains. In Sabah’s fish markets, voting stations, supermarkets or streets, for a bystander to brand passers-by “illegal” on the basis of their speech is to reduce them, their variegated life histories, and the constellation of signs that they evince or call their own to an essence that has an administrative offence as its basis.

And yet, Goldstein notes, “from an anthropological perspective, the statement ‘no human being is illegal’ is also clearly false. We are all configured socially and politically, our basic human existence shaped by the laws, written and unwritten, that ground our cultural experience” (Goldstein 2014). We live in a world, he explains, in which categorical distinctions and oppositions shape everyday lived experience and encode differential access to rights.

In such a world, illegality is inevitable: The legal requires the illegal, it recognizes itself by imagining its alter.... State and public discourses oppose illegality to security, and represent illegal people — immigrants and other ‘terrorists’ — as posing existential threats to ‘our’ way of life. (Goldstein 2014; see also De Genova 2005; Willen 2007)

This article has examined how the legal has struggled to recognize itself in contemporary Sabah, a place “plagued and haunted by an insidious problem” of identification (Shim et al. 2014, p. 1). It has explored the ways in which various overlapping categorical

distinctions — legal and illegal, citizen and non-citizen, “authentic” and “fake”, local and foreign, Malaysian and Indonesian — are not as distinct as many Sabahans would like them to be. From the willy-nilly branding reproaches of “*pendatang!*”, “*PATI!*”, or “*indon!*” to the recurring observation that “illegals look like locals”, Sabahans are struggling to distinguish citizens from non-citizens. The allegedly widespread circulation and distribution of national identity cards to undocumented immigrants certainly has not helped bring these distinctions into clearer focus. However, and as the foregoing analysis has demonstrated, the fog that blurs these distinctions lifts when citizens and state agents become sensorially attuned to and orient themselves to the wrinkles of linguistic difference that distinguish Bugis immigrants from their co-ethnic hosts. I have shown that embodied processes of hearing and listening make “illegal” yet illusory presences aurally legible across different settings throughout Malaysia: fish markets, harbours, buses and so on. I have also suggested that Bugis immigrants — anticipating the eavesdropping presences of inhospitable citizens or state agents — can identify the sounds or intonation patterns that differentiate them from local people and can thus in principle minimize such sounds and effectively imitate local habits of speech in order to “pass”.

In *Stigma*, Erving Goffman famously wrote that, when “a stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind” (Goffman 1963, p. 2). He noted that we may characterize such an individual as “quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous or weak. He or she is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma” (Goffman [1963] 1986, p. 3). Goffman sorted the stigmatized into two types: the discredited and the discreditable. The discredited exhibit a stigmatized quality to such a degree that its concealment from persons whom Goffman termed “normals” — those members of society who do not evince the attribute — is impossible. The discreditable, in contrast, do not exhibit a stigmatized quality in any readily apparent way, and may,

with varying degrees of success, manage that quality or characteristic in ways that enable them to “pass” as so-called “normals” and thus avail themselves of the pleasures afforded to “normal” members of society. And yet the art of passing is also plagued with risk, haunted by what Garfinkel — another scholar of “passing” — called the “possibility of detection and ruin” (Garfinkel [1967] 2006, p. 60).

In iconic cases of clandestine cross-border migration across the globe — Latin American migrants to the United States, North African Muslim migrants to Europe, or migrants from the Global South to the Global North more generally — immigrants do not enjoy the luxury of passing or even of trying to pass. Subject to racializing configurations of power and a global surge in xenophobic nationalisms, these migrants’ bodies are not discreditable but rather taken to be immediately discredited. They exhibit readily identifiable phenotypic, linguistic, cultural or religious signs of their “illegal” status. The case of Bugis immigrants in the Land Below the Wind, however, is different. There, Bugis immigrants from Indonesia pass as locals with relative ease — a fact that has engendered a feeling of political paranoia among citizens who seek to distinguish “illegals” from “genuine Sabahans”, Bugis Indonesians from Bugis Malaysians, and other categorical distinctions with a creeping sense of desperation. And yet, amidst ongoing drives towards an “absolute solution to cleanse Sabah of illegal immigrants” (*Borneo Post*, 19 October 2015), Bugis immigrants and their co-ethnic Malaysian sympathizers are increasingly concerned about and aware of the always-present risk of their “discredibility” and detection.

Insofar as undocumented Bugis immigrants are aware of the risks of sounding “too Bugis” and understand the advantages of “masking their Bugisness”, they realize that passing as a local person in contemporary Sabah is not just an issue of exhibiting certain qualities. After all, Bugis immigrants share a multiplicity of characteristics or qualities with their co-ethnic Malaysian hosts. Rather, it is an issue of exhibiting those qualities in particular intensities, modulating them so that they conform to or successfully imitate locally salient norms and forms. Recalling Scott’s comments on measurement or

reckoning (Scott 1998, p. 11), imitating such norms or forms is an ongoing process of embodied commensuration and calibration — one that is aurally mediated and orally achieved. Passing is an issue of tacitly calibrating the relative intensity of certain features of speech so that they align with local habits. In the presence of dangerous bystanders, Bugis immigrants must phonically minimize, mask or flatten certain features of their speech so that the signs that they exhibit are not sonically registered as “too Bugis” and thus indicative of “illegal” presences.²⁹ In this crucial sense, signs of illegality are detected with reference to intensity gradients.³⁰ In order to successfully imitate local people, one cannot speak in too sing-songy a manner or in a manner that exhibits too many velar nasals [ŋ] at the ends of words. Otherwise one’s speech will sound like “the speech of an illegal” (*cakap macam PATI*).

That Bugis immigrants in Sabah and their Malaysian hosts are prone to saying, “We’re the same, but different” (*Kita sama, tapi berbeza*) suggests that they are aware that they exhibit a shared ensemble of qualities in different intensities. To the chagrin of Bugis immigrants and their co-ethnic sympathizers, Sabah’s citizens and state agents are hearing that different sameness as well.

Acknowledgements

An early version of this manuscript was presented at the 2016 annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies on the panel, “Speaking across Borders: Language and Human Movement across Asia”, coordinated by Kathryn C. Hardy and featuring Joseph Errington as discussant. A more developed version was presented in May 2016 in a public seminar at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, where Leonard Andaya, Barbara Watson Andaya, Jamie S. Davidson, Ulla Fionna and Deasy Simandjuntak offered comments that informed the manuscript’s revision. Ongoing conversations with James T. Collins, Joseph Errington, Erik Harms, Hui Yew-Foong, Paul Kockelman and Jane Wong have shaped the ways in which I approach the material presented here. Pearlyn Pang of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute

GIS Project assisted in the creation of the map that accompanies this article. I thank two anonymous reviewers and *SOJOURN* editor Michael Montesano for their generous critiques and suggestions. Finally, I offer my heartfelt thanks to the Bugis individuals whose voices populate this article.

Andrew M. Carruthers is Visiting Fellow in the Indonesian Studies Programme at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119614; email: andrew_carruthers@iseas.edu.sg.

NOTES

1. An alternative, more formally semiotic and linguistic-anthropological, analysis of the material presented in this article is forthcoming in Carruthers (forthcoming).
2. See Carruthers 2016a for a more in-depth review of these developments as they shape contemporary crises of citizenship in Sabah.
3. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has made recurring references to his Bugis heritage during speeches and goodwill visits throughout Indonesia and Malaysia. In 2005, then deputy prime minister Najib visited his ancestral homeland of South Sulawesi (Sa'Odah Elias 2009). Allegedly a direct descendant of Sultan Hasanuddin, the leader of Gowa from 1653–69, Najib was granted the title I Mappadulu Daeng Mattimung Karaeng Sanrobone by South Sulawesi officials (or a group that one paper glossed as “the Bugis government”) out of genealogical respect for his ascendant line (ibid.). In October 2007 the prime minister returned once more to South Sulawesi to receive an honorary doctorate from Hasanuddin University. “The awarding of this honorary doctorate is very important to me. It’s as if I’ve come back, because I’m of Bugis descent”, he told his audience (Praginanto 2007). In the events following the 1MDB scandal, the prime minister frequently gestured towards his Bugis heritage as evidence of his bravery in navigating tempestuous political waters, but this posturing as a “Bugis warrior” ultimately earned him much ridicule from opposition politicians and the press (see *Malaysiakini*, 6 June 2015; *Free Malaysia Today*, 12 May 2015).
4. I began ethnographic research in Sabah in June 2013 following fifteen cumulative months of research in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, starting in June 2010. Based primarily in and around Tawau, I lived among and interacted with Bugis migrants and Bugis Malaysians across a variety of settings, ranging from palm oil plantations, to middle class suburbs, to

rural villages, to Tawau Town's harbour front and urban core. An initial six months of research in 2013 were followed by subsequent trips in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

5. In Malay, Bugis immigrants are variously described as *pendatang*, *pendatang asing*, *pendatang asing tanpa izin* (or *PATI* for short), *indon*, or *ilegal indon*. *Pendatang* directly translated is "one who comes", but is ordinarily glossed in English as "immigrant"; *pendatang asing* is "foreign immigrant" or "foreigner"; and *pendatang asing tanpa izin* may be directly translated as "foreigners without permission" but is conventionally glossed in English as "illegal immigrant" or "illegal". *Pendatang* or "immigrant" is frequently used to characterize Bugis newcomers (that is, *pendatang Bugis*), but the term as it appears in both everyday talk and digitally mediated discourse has taken on a decidedly negative valence, such that "illegal" (as a modifier in the phrase *pendatang ilegal*) is often taken as assumed. In this respect, labelling an individual as a *pendatang* in contemporary Sabah not only serves to highlight her or his ostensible foreign-ness, but also doubles as an interrogation of her or his legal status. The same may be said for *Indon*, which, while generally referring to Indonesian nationals, is most commonly deployed in Sabah to refer to Indonesian workers who entered the East Malaysian state through clandestine means, and are mostly Bugis. With respect to English usage and English glosses, Healey (2000) and others (see Nair 2008) have detected a noticeable "hardening" (Nair 2008, p. 220) of the terminology used in the Malaysian public sphere to characterize undocumented foreign workers. This hardening has reflected a shift in the stance of the media as they came to position themselves "as the voice of an uneasy Malaysian populace" (ibid.). Referred to as "irregular migrants" in the 1970s, undocumented immigrants came to be referred to as "illegal migrants" in the 1980s and "aliens" or "illegals" in the 1990s (Healey 2000, p. 231). In Sabah, undocumented Bugis immigrants are variously described in everyday spoken English as "illegal foreign workers", "illegal immigrants", or "illegals".
6. Interview, 19 August 2013, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.
7. Interview, 9 July 2013, Tawau. *Risomokolo* is a passive item in the Bugis language that has *somokolo* (cognate with the Dutch item *smokkelen* or "smuggle") as its root (see also Idrus 2008).
8. Field notes, 5 August 2013, Tawau, Sabah.
9. Field notes, 17 August 2013, Tawau.
10. For theories of affordances and their application to the study of infrastructure, see Gibson 1977 and Kockelman 2013.
11. Field notes, 26 October 2013, Lahad Datu, Sabah.
12. The original passage in Malay from which this excerpt was taken reads

as follows: “[A]nak dan keturunan masih tetap memiliki simpati terhadap tanah leluhur nenek moyangnya, Indonesia ... [B]agi orang Bugis khususnya di Tawau, walau ada yang telah dilahirkan di sini, namun tetap menjiwai kesadaran bangsa yang tinggi, kerana tidak terputus hubungan dengan tanahair. Mereka bebas keluar masuk melalui Tawau tanpa sebarang kerumitan” (Mutalib 1999, p. 45).

13. “Budaya luar yang keras, ganas dan kurang luhur melalui proses asimilasi dan difusi dengan budaya tempatan sehingga kita tidak lagi boleh membezakan siapa yang lebih ... Bugis daripada orang Bugis” (Mutalib 1999, p. 455).
14. This practical challenge is not unique to the Bugis; many commentators have noted that Suluk immigrants from the southern Philippines are equally difficult to distinguish from their co-ethnic Malaysian hosts. Suffice it to say that considerable attention — both political and scholarly — has centred on the Suluk presence in Sabah (Kee 2014; for overviews see Sadiq 2008; Horowitz 2016). The Suluk are a Muslim people hailing from the Philippines’ Sulu archipelago, a place long troubled by ongoing insurgency, terrorist attacks and banditry. For more than forty years, many Suluk have moved to Sabah as refugees to escape this conflict. In recent years, however, they have gained global notoriety for kidnapping foreigners in eastern Sabah. In 2013 a man who fashioned himself as the crown prince of the Sulu sultanate led a force of gunmen to eastern Sabah to assert an historical claim of sovereignty to the state, leading to a stand-off with Malaysian security forces. Prime Minister Najib formed the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) and the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) in 2013 in response to the kidnappings and attacks (*Free Malaysia Today*, 9 May 2014). To this day, the Malaysian government continues closely to monitor eastern Sabah as a “red zone” (*zon merah*). This monitoring has effectively intensified the surveillance of undocumented immigrants. The U.S. Department of State forbids its employees from travelling there without express permission and strongly advises against tourist travel there. For these and other reasons, the Suluk have been subject to much scrutiny on the part of the Malaysian government and scholars alike (see Sadiq 2008; Horowitz 2016). In contrast, and perhaps because of these ongoing security threats in Sabah, undocumented Bugis Indonesians in Sabah have more or less avoided the glaring spotlight of attention shone on their undocumented Suluk counterparts.
15. See essays collected in Barnard (2004) for a variety of accounts on the situated and contested nature of “Malayness” across contexts.
16. See Carruthers (2016*b*) for a semiotically inflected account of commensurability and commensuration. Also see Kockelman (2016) and Espeland and Stevens (1998).

17. Field notes, 14 December 2013, Tawau, and 20 July 2015, Tawau.
18. Field recording, 2 August 2013, Tawau.
19. In Malay, "*Lagunya. Soun-soun itu tidak sama.*"
20. Although it is not central to the expository concerns of this article, what has come to be referred to in academic literature as "Sabah Malay" is based on Brunei Malay. It is widely used in cross-ethnic interactions throughout the East Malaysian state. This vehicular variety is used in a range of settings, from marketplaces to homes (Wong 2000 and forthcoming) and was often characterized by my informants as "closer" to Indonesian than to standard Malay. Sabah Malay is readily distinguished from standard Malay by reference to a variety of phonological and lexical features (Wong 2000), and the widespread use of discourse particle *bah* is perhaps one of its most iconic features.
21. Field recording, 8 July 2014, Tawau.
22. Field recording, 14 December 2013, Tawau.
23. Field notes, 14 December 2013, Tawau.
24. The linguistic term of art for the phonological restriction of a language's sounds or phonemes is "phonotactics".
25. Field notes, 4 August 2013, Lahad Datu.
26. Ibid.
27. Field notes, 8 November 2013, Lahad Datu.
28. Field recording, 21 July 2014, Sabah.
29. For an ethnographic and semiotic account of the phonic and sonic (or "phonosonic") mediation of qualitative categories, see Harkness 2014.
30. Indeed, and as Kockelman (2017) has recently observed, "Most signs are best understood as *gradient flows* rather than discrete units. Their significance is their changing intensity; and we interpret them, in large part, by covarying our trajectories" (Kockelman 2017, p. 348).

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